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Teaching Internship Program (Amity): Contributions to Non-Native EFL Teachers of El Salvador

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Abstract

The advancement of a skilled labor force in El Salvador has been significantly supported by the professional development of English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly among teacher candidates in their senior years of study. This qualitative study explored how non-native English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers perceive the internship program experience, AMITY. This qualitative study, cemented in hermeneutic phenomenology, analyzed participants' experiences using Atlas.ti software. Through homogeneous sampling, eight individuals with shared characteristics were selected. Interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, using a phenomenological interview protocol. There were two main themes derived from the participants' experiences: their perception of the program and their professional development. As part of a minority group, while living in the United States, they have now a better understanding of the issues that diverse populations go through, making them more empathetic with their students. Professionally, it has helped them to adapt and integrate non-traditional teaching approaches to El Salvador; such as games, stratified classroom areas, and the integration of ICT (Information Communication Technologies) into their sessions as teachers in El Salvador. All these shifts seem to interfere with their students' learning of English as a Foreign Language.

Keywords: EFL, hermeneutic phenomenology, teaching workforce, professional development, exchange programs.

1. Introduction

In recent years, English Language Teaching (ELT) professionalization in El Salvador has experienced significant growth, with teacher candidates in their junior and senior years actively pursuing various international professional development. The Amity Institute, a U.S.-based

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nonprofit, supports these non-native English speakers through internship programs administered locally by the Salvadoran American Scholarship Program (SASP), established in 2013 by the U.S. Embassy.

Despite the program's existence, a critical research gap persists to understand how these non-native EFL teacher candidates perceive their internship experiences and translate acquired knowledge into teaching effectiveness. This study created an updated qualitative database and established a precedent for future comparative studies exploring international bilingual internship programs.

The research addresses multiple scholarly interests. Huang and Varghese (2015) argue that categorizing non-native English-speaking teachers inadequately captures their complex roles. Guo et al. (2021) highlight specific barriers interns encounter, including communication challenges and the need for culturally adapted instructional materials. Aneja (2016) argues that language and identity are continuously shaped and reinforced through everyday interactions and communication. Therefore, it has been suggested that to move beyond the rigid distinctions between native and non-native speakers, a poststructuralist orientation is needed to increase equity in the field of ELT. Importantly, Alghofaili and Elyas (2017) demonstrated that teacher effectiveness stems from competence and experience, not nationality.

By documenting internship experiences, the professionalization of ELT in a non-native speaking context, will overall benefit the involved stakeholders, teacher candidates, faculty members, and higher education institutions interested in understanding the transformative potential of bilingual exchange programs.

The Socio-Cultural Theory

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory fundamentally claims that cognitive development emerges through social interactions and cultural environments. By emphasizing mediation, scaffolding, and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), this framework illuminates how cultural tools like language facilitate learning (Shabani, 2016).

Within educational contexts, particularly in the AMITY intern program, this theory manifests through professional growth occurring via guided, real-world experiences. Wenger's (2010) situative approach complements this perspective, highlighting communities of practice as critical learning mechanisms. Swain and Lapkin (2013) further extend this understanding by demonstrating how multilingual repertoires serve as cognitive tools in collaborative learning environments.

Mercer et al. (2017) reinforce these insights, suggesting that dialogic interactions, especially when supported by digital technologies, can significantly enhance educational outcomes. The sociocultural extension of Kolb's theory, as interpreted by Beckett and Hager (2002) and Fook (2023), emphasizes that learning transcends internal cognitive reflection, becoming richly contextualized through external social interactions.

For teacher interns, this approach underscores the importance of authentic teaching contexts where reflective practice, mentorship, and collegial support converge to facilitate meaningful professional development.

2. Methods

This qualitative study was grounded in a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to understanding the nuances of lived experiences, both individual and collective. According to Husserl (1998), this approach helps to capture the complexity of individual and group experiences by explaining the nature, essence, and truth of phenomena. The study used homogeneous sampling to select participants based on shared characteristics relevant to the research objectives. Patton (2015) highlighted this approach as focusing on individuals with similar experiences to gain deeper insights into specific issues, prioritizing the richness of their experiences, as noted by González (2021).

Participants were drawn from the 2017–2020 cohorts of an international teaching exchange internship program, holding bachelor's degrees in English and actively teaching in diverse educational settings, including K-12 schools, language academies, and higher education institutions. Recruitment was conducted through professional networks via email, with informed consent obtained. A total of eight participants, two males and six females, with an age range of 23 to 27, from different regions in El Salvador, including Santa Ana, San Vicente, San Salvador, and San Miguel. Data collection involved 65-minute online interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams, with transcription done using Otter.ai.

Data analysis was performed using Atlas.ti facilitating the organization and identification of themes within the data. Initially, open deductive coding allowed themes to emerge; this was

represented in Atlas as codes. Next, axial coding permitted to group the codes into groups or Group code in Atlas. The group code became the final theme discussed here.

3. Results

Theme 1: Career path

The participants' narratives reveal a shared journey of discovering and embracing teaching, shaped by diverse experiences and personal contexts. Mary reflected, "I was not applying for Amity but for a scholarship to study one semester at one of the universities in the United States. [...] Later, they called and offered me an internship, which I decided to take." This highlights how external circumstances, such as the unexpected offer to join the AMITY program, can guide individuals toward paths they might not have initially considered. Such moments underscore the role of serendipity and adaptability in shaping career trajectories and personal growth.

George echoed the formative impact of early informal teaching experiences: "When I was still a student at university, they had clubs where you could work with other students, helping them teach something. [...] Technically, I was teaching since my first year at university, but it wasn't official, just for the clubs." These interactions nurtured a natural affinity for teaching, where peer engagement planted the seeds of his teaching identity. His experiences highlight how external recognition of his abilities and personal enjoyment shaped his journey, illustrating the influence of informal settings in developing professional aspirations.

Mandy's journey into teaching began at just 15, working with kids and youth groups at her church. "I started teaching at church when I was 15," she shared. "Later, while pursuing my associate degree in English, I was asked to teach English to kids as well." Teaching Bible studies in Sunday school and later English classes on Saturdays allowed her to work with children and teenagers, fostering essential communication and instructional skills. These early experiences not only built her confidence but also deepened her passion for education, ultimately inspiring her to pursue teaching as a professional career.

Missy's shared a powerful shift in perception. "Since I was a kid, I had always wanted to be a teacher," she shared. "At first, I didn't like English and thought I'd be a math teacher. [...] I had a teacher who made me fall in love with the language." Her early resistance to English changed through the influence of an inspiring teacher, igniting a passion for the subject. This transformation highlights how a teacher's enthusiasm can shape a student's attitude and career path, ultimately leading Missy to pursue a degree to become an English teacher.

John's journey into teaching took a few unexpected turns but ultimately led him to a fulfilling career. "Since high school, I enjoyed being a teacher assistant and decided to pursue teaching as my major," he explained. Although he initially dreamed of becoming a science teacher, his PAES test score wasn't high enough, so he shifted to English. By 2015, he was assisting with English and business English at a university, and the experience solidified his passion for teaching. Later, he gained formal experience in schools and even taught Spanish during an internship in the U.S. Today, he thrives as an educator at a tech university and academies, showcasing how flexibility and determination can shape a rewarding career.

Connie and Jeff agreed on how formal opportunities (scholarships and teaching positions) further solidified their educator identities. In 2014, Connie received a scholarship to continue her teaching degree:

During my fifth year, I got a scholarship for the AMITY program and worked as a teacher assistant in a Spanish immersion school in Minnesota for about 10 months. I learned about teaching techniques, discipline, and routines used in U.S. immersion schools. After returning to El Salvador, I finished my degree and graduated in December. By January, I started teaching basic English at the university, working with students in international relations, communications, journalism, and English language majors until August 2021.

When Jeff chose his major, he hesitated to become a teacher:

... until I took the Didactics III course at university. I had the opportunity to teach at a school in my hometown [...], where I conducted activities for fifth and fourth-grade students. I realized I was good at it, and the students enjoyed my lessons. In January 2015, (started) to teach in the English extension program, marking the start of my formal teaching career. I worked there for six months before going to the United States, and after returning, I continued at the university while developing my career at various places.

For these two participants, professional development was driven by structured experiences and academic advancement, supported by institutional frameworks. These accounts illustrate how formal and informal teaching experiences converge, shaping the participants' commitment to education.

Sheldon:

I feel satisfaction when I see my students improve and learn throughout the process of acquiring a second language. It can be difficult for them, but when they express their gratitude by saying things like, "Thank you, teacher, now I can speak the language," it makes me happy. However, teaching English in El Salvador can be challenging because not everyone likes the language.

Finally, Sheldon's reflection on the challenges of teaching English in El Salvador, especially with students who struggle with the language, speaks to the perseverance required in teaching. The personal satisfaction derived from witnessing student progress underlines the emotional rewards tied to teaching, despite the obstacles faced. This satisfaction is what consolidates Sheldon's career path choice.

The narratives above were grouped into specific codes that reflect how participants entered and embraced the teaching profession. As shown in [Table 1](#), these codes fall under the category "Career Path" and are accompanied by their descriptions and representative statements.

Table 1. Career Path

Code	Description	Supporting statements
Serendipity and adaptability	Unexpected opportunities leading to career shifts.	Mary: "I was not applying for Amity but for a scholarship to study one semester at one of the universities in the United States. [...] Later, they called and offered me an internship, which I decided to take."
Early informal teaching experiences	Initial non-official teaching roles fostering passion.	George: "When I was still a student at university, they had clubs where you could work with other students, helping them teach something. [...] Technically, I was teaching since my first year at university, but it wasn't official, just for the clubs." Mandy: "I started teaching at church when I was 15," she shared. "Later, while pursuing my associate degree in English, I was asked to teach English to kids as well."
Influence of inspiring teachers	Role models changing attitudes toward subjects or teaching.	Missy: "Since I was a kid, I had always wanted to be a teacher," she shared. "At first, I didn't like English and thought I'd be a math teacher. [...] I had a teacher who made me fall in love with the language."
Shifts in subject preference	Adjusting career focus due to external factors like test scores.	John: "Since high school, I enjoyed being a teacher assistant and decided to pursue teaching as my major," he explained. Although he initially dreamed of becoming a science teacher, his PAES test score wasn't high enough, so he shifted to English.
Formal opportunities and scholarships	Structured programs solidifying teaching identity.	Connie: "During my fifth year, I got a scholarship for the AMITY program and worked as a teacher assistant in a Spanish immersion school in Minnesota for about 10 months."

Code	Description	Supporting statements
Personal satisfaction and challenges	Emotional rewards despite difficulties in teaching.	<p>Jeff: "... until I took the Didactics III course at university. I had the opportunity to teach at a school in my hometown [...], where I conducted activities for fifth and fourth-grade students."</p> <p>Sheldon: "I feel satisfaction when I see my students improve and learn throughout the process of acquiring a second language. [...] However, teaching English in El Salvador can be challenging because not everyone likes the language."</p>

Theme 2: Interns' expectations on AMITY

The participants' stories expose a collective journey of personal growth and self-discovery influenced by their internship experiences in the U.S. Many entered the program uncertain about their roles and futures. Mary shared, "I didn't even want to be a teacher, but that experience [the internship] helped me better understand what I wanted to do. [...] Until I was there in the U.S., teaching kindergarteners, I knew I wanted to be a teacher." Her initial hesitation shifted to a clear passion for teaching, even though she now works with adolescents. This recurring theme demonstrates how immersive experiences can redefine professional aspirations.

George considered his initial concerns about communication during the internship, stating, "I didn't have many expectations. [...] My expectations were mostly related to how I was going to communicate with them or whether they would understand me." He anticipated speaking Spanish in school but worried about using English outside the classroom. This highlights the linguistic challenges participants faced, emphasizing their focus on effective communication as a critical aspect of their experience. George's reflection underscores how concerns about language use and comprehension shaped his expectations, illustrating the importance of adaptability in cross-cultural and multilingual settings.

Communication emerged as a central concern for participants, particularly regarding their bilingual experiences. George expressed apprehension about navigating interactions in both Spanish and English, a sentiment echoed by Jeff who found himself grappling with the complexities of language in diverse contexts. This concern underlines the critical role of effective communication in fostering connections and confidence within the classroom setting: "When you're studying an English major, you're expecting to teach English. [...] Still, it was going to be in an English environment, so it was useful for me anyway." Working with fourth graders, who alternated between Spanish and English instruction, provided valuable practice and demonstrates how bilingual teaching environments can broaden professional skills and enhance adaptability

Missy expressed:

My expectations were really high, and I achieved those expectations; it was way more than I was expecting. I remember that when I was studying at university, I had two teachers who were part of this program in the past. In class, they sometimes brought up that topic and talked about how that experience helped them become the teachers they are. That experience not only helped with their teaching careers but also in their personal lives. For example, if you had asked me before participating in this program, I wasn't that confident, independent, or sociable but because of my participation, I am now confident and independent; I've become more sociable and acquired many techniques and strategies that I'm implementing now when I'm teaching. It really was a nice experience!

To which John echoed:

Before, my main goal was to improve my English language skills. Being immersed in a different culture allowed me to learn about its traditions, customs, codes, and rules. This experience taught me that studying American culture is different from just reading about it; it's about living it! On a personal level, I improved my skills and learned from teachers' strategies that I can apply here. Although those strategies were originally in Spanish, I collaborated with partners to present them in a way that would help us prepare for graduation.

Finally, Sheldon shared:

Well, my purpose was to improve my skills in English. So, when I went to the United States, the first week was like I was in shock. Everything was equal, and the native speakers were different. How they spoke and how the teachers just conversed was striking. You learn the language through your teachers, but hearing native speakers is different. It's kind of difficult when you experience that.

These participants emphasized personal growth as a significant outcome of their experiences. They reported enhanced confidence, independence, and social skills, illustrating how the internship facilitated not only professional development but also personal enrichment. This growth aligns with Sheldon's reflection on the shock of engaging with native speakers, emphasizing the deep impact of cultural immersion on language acquisition and comprehension.

The mention of an "English environment" implies an awareness of the linguistic and cultural dynamics at play, where Spanish teaching occurs within a predominantly English-speaking framework. The acknowledgment of working with fourth graders introduces a specific age group, which may influence teaching methods and content delivery, particularly given the alternating month-long focus on Spanish and English.

Participants Connie and Mandy expressed diverse expectations about their internships, ranging from curiosity to the need for guidance. Connie stated, "When I started my internship here, I was expecting to learn how they teach here. [...] It was higher than my expectations." Mandy anticipated structured support, explaining, "I expected them to tell me how the system works, [...] then take me to the classroom." Their reflections emphasize the importance of mentorship and how experiences often exceed initial expectations, fostering deeper professional growth.

The expectations expressed by the participants were synthesized into codes that capture both their concerns and the growth they experienced. [Table 2](#) summarizes the category "Interns' Expectations on AMITY."

Table 2. Interns' Expectations on AMITY

Code	Description	Supporting statements
Uncertainty and self-discovery	Entering with unclear roles but gaining clarity through experience.	Mary: "I didn't even want to be a teacher, but that experience [the internship] helped me better understand what I wanted to do. [...] Until I was there in the U.S., teaching kindergarteners, I knew I wanted to be a teacher." George: "I didn't have many expectations. [...] My expectations were mostly related to how I was going to communicate with them or whether they would understand me."
Communication and language concerns	Worries about bilingual interactions and comprehension.	Jeff: "When you're studying an English major, you're expecting to teach English. [...] Still, it was going to be in an English environment, so it was useful for me anyway."
Personal growth and confidence	Expectations of enhanced skills like independence and sociability.	Missy: "My expectations were really high, and I achieved those expectations; it was way more than I was expecting. [...] For example, if you had asked me before participating in this program, I wasn't that confident, independent, or sociable but because of my participation, I am now confident and independent."

Code	Description	Supporting statements
Cultural and linguistic immersion shock	Initial challenges with native speakers and environments.	John: "Before, my main goal was to improve my English language skills. Being immersed in a different culture allowed me to learn about its traditions, customs, codes, and rules." Sheldon: "Well, my purpose was to improve my skills in English. So, when I went to the United States, the first week was like I was in shock. Everything was equal, and the native speakers were different." Connie: "When I started my internship here, I was expecting to learn how they teach here. [...]"
Mentorship and structured support	Anticipating guidance and exceeding expectations.	It was higher than my expectations." Mandy: "I expected them to tell me how the system works, [...] then take me to the classroom."

Theme 3: Interns' responsibilities

During their internship, participants experienced some responsibilities, which made them reflect and mature, molding their growth and professional development. Mary said that she had to assist in various daily activities:

I used to like helping in different activities during the day... Helped the kids. So, during three months, I was just getting used to the way the teacher taught and all the things that we used to do and all the things that she was in charge to do. I was just trying to help the kids to move from one place to another and try to repeat instructions. Then, I was in charge of the main activities, like being responsible for different activities depending on the subject, from math, language, or art. To take the kids to physical education and to music class. To help check their homework assignments.

Connie's commitment to working with those who were behind in their academic progress emerged in the following:

In the classroom, it was just me and the teacher with the kids every day. I guided the morning meeting and also managed their line as they returned to the classroom. During that time, I worked with small groups, particularly focusing on those who felt a bit left out or were a little behind the others. I had the opportunity to help these small groups improve.

The participants' statements illustrate complex engagement with their roles in the classroom, emphasizing their willingness to foster a supportive learning environment. A commonality across the narratives is the emphasis on student support and guidance, with participants expressing enjoyment in assisting children through various activities and transitions. This reflects a deep-seated dedication to ensuring students' smooth navigation of their educational experience.

George coined:

The students are always going to try to speak to you in English because they know that their main teachers would not let them speak in English in the class. So they say no matter if they are speaking to you in English, you always have to speak in Spanish. So technically, my main role for that was to speak in Spanish at all times and, from time to time, to prepare presentations related to cultural things from El Salvador. This way, I could explain what was also followed about, or things related to behaviors or cultures that we had here.

Furthermore, the importance of language emerges as an essential aspect of their roles, particularly the requirement to communicate predominantly in Spanish. This not only reflects the cultural and linguistic dynamics of the classroom but also highlights their role in creating an inclusive atmosphere that values students' backgrounds, as articulated by George. This language focus facilitates deeper connections between the participants and their learning experiences,

aligning with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the role of language as a tool for cognitive development and social interaction.

Missy's account demonstrates the multifaceted nature of her responsibilities during the internship. Each day, she prepared materials in the teacher's workroom, escorted students to lunch, and supervised them during breaks. Weekly bus duty involved ensuring students boarded safely and avoided traffic. Her teaching role varied by grade level. Reflecting on this, she stated, "In fourth grade, I barely had the chance to teach, but the teacher often gave me a small group of students to reinforce the topics she was explaining to everyone, so it was a form of personalized teaching".

Mandy described her teaching responsibilities, which involved teaching at least one period daily, though she often taught more, particularly in social studies, community, and science. Occasionally, she substituted for her mentor teacher when the latter was absent. Reflecting on this experience, Mandy explained, *"I think I kind of had a click with her and like, got to understand how she worked well. So, she liked what we planned together, so I knew what was going to happen the next day."* This rapport enabled Mandy to anticipate and adapt effectively to classroom needs, showcasing her growth in managing diverse instructional tasks.

The participants often took on varied responsibilities, from preparing materials and supervising students during breaks to conducting specific subject lessons, which indicates their adaptability and willingness to meet the diverse needs of the classroom. Missy's experience with bus duty and Mandy's role as a substitute teacher exemplify this flexibility.

John stated:

Inside the school, I was in the position of "auxiliary teacher." I was teaching four sections of 20 to 40 minutes at the beginning of the internship, and for the first two or three months, I had been observing how the teachers managed the class, controlled behavior, and created activities. They used different types of strategies, such as behavior charts, to manage various student needs, so we started learning how to manage those things. After the first two or three months, for another four months, I helped teachers with 20 to 40-minute sessions in subjects like math, reading, and science, depending on the grade and the teacher. Each teacher would decide, "Okay, you're going to help me here with math," or "You're going to help me here with reading centers," and then with independent reading. We worked together in groups and started helping the kids with reading comprehension.

Another significant aspect is the shift from observation to active participation in teaching roles, as another participant described transitioning from observing classroom management techniques to actively engaging in teaching and personalized instruction. For instance, John notes the initial period of observation before taking on teaching responsibilities, emphasizing the importance of learning effective strategies for managing diverse student needs.

Other participants shared their experiences supporting reading development, particularly in Spanish. Sheldon reflected on his role, stating, "I focused on helping them read fluently in Spanish and tried to explain some words that they probably didn't know the meaning of". Noting his emphasis on developing both fluency and comprehension during reading sessions of Spanish.

Similarly, Jeff explained, "I was in charge of helping the students with reading comprehension in Spanish. So, I had to go to the school's library...to check what would be the best books for them to read". He demonstrated his proactivity when selecting appropriate reading materials aligned with students' literary needs.

Both participants emphasized a commitment to fostering an engaging and supportive reading environment. Sheldon focused on ensuring students' cognitive engagement with texts, while Jeff demonstrated adaptability by managing both instructional and supportive tasks, such as preparing materials and curating resources. These roles reflect the diverse responsibilities interns undertake, often bridging instructional support and active facilitation.

However, challenges in role clarity were evident. Jeff expressed that there were moments when he felt less actively engaged, mentioning, "There were a couple of things in which I wasn't doing anything, basically, like helping any students. I was just helping the teacher". This dynamic illustrates the oscillation between roles as interns navigate responsibilities and adjust to varying classroom demands.

These accounts highlight the significance of reading fluency and comprehension within participants' responsibilities, emphasizing both their impact on student learning and the interns' professional growth. Their reflections align with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which underscores the role of interactive and contextual learning in cognitive development.

Participants also described the variety of tasks and responsibilities they assumed during their internships. These were organized into codes that highlight classroom support, teaching roles, and challenges in role clarity. Table 3 presents the category “Interns’ Responsibilities,” showing the codes, their descriptions, and illustrative quotations.

Table 3. Interns’ Responsibilities

Code	Description	Supporting statements
Daily assistance and student support	Helping with routines, transitions, and small groups.	Mary: “I used to like helping in different activities during the day... Helped the kids. [...] I was just trying to help the kids to move from one place to another and try to repeat instructions.” Connie: “I guided the morning meeting and also managed their line as they returned to the classroom. During that time, I worked with small groups, particularly focusing on those who felt a bit left out or were a little behind the others.”
Language and cultural facilitation	Maintaining Spanish use and sharing cultural insights.	George: “The students are always going to try to speak to you in English [...] So technically, my main role for that was to speak in Spanish at all times and, from time to time, to prepare presentations related to cultural things from El Salvador.”
Supervisory and preparatory tasks	Material preparation, supervision, and bus duty.	Missy: “Each day, she prepared materials in the teacher’s workroom, escorted students to lunch, and supervised them during breaks. Weekly bus duty involved ensuring students boarded safely and avoided traffic.”
Active teaching and substitution	Leading lessons in subjects like social studies or science.	Mandy: “I think I kind of had a click with her and like, got to understand how she worked well. [...] I knew what was going to happen the next day.” (Referring to planning and teaching periods.) John: “After the first two or three months, for another four months, I helped teachers with 20 to 40-minute sessions in subjects like math, reading, and science.”
Reading development support	Focusing on fluency, comprehension, and material selection.	Sheldon: “I focused on helping them read fluently in Spanish and tried to explain some words that they probably didn’t know the meaning of.” Jeff: “I was in charge of helping the students with reading comprehension in Spanish. So, I had to go to the school’s library...to check what would be the best books for them to read.”
Challenges in role clarity	Periods of underutilization or oscillation in engagement.	Jeff: “There were a couple of things in which I wasn’t doing anything, basically, like helping any students. I was just helping the teacher.”

Theme 4: Interns' recommendations on AMITY

After living their AMITY experience, interns share some highlighting recommendations related to the program from their perception. This also provides a reflection addressed to current and future applicants to embrace the advantages of this professional development process.

The participants' reflections on their internship program reveal a collective emphasis on cultural immersion, personal growth, and transformative teaching philosophies. These are some highlighting citations concerning what they perceived living this experience aligned with the reasons why they recommend the program to future applicants. Hence, this reflects Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the importance of social interactions and cultural experiences as essential factors in cognitive development and personal transformation.

Mary shared a reflection on her cultural experience, saying, "It was the first time living for a year in another country...to know that there are people with another way of living, another way of thinking, another way to do things". This highlights the personal growth gained through exposure to different cultures.

George expressed, "It helps you understand other cultures better and practice the language...speaking with a native speaker is not the same as practicing with people who learn to speak in another country". This emphasizes the value of immersion for cultural and linguistic development.

John noted the dual cultural and linguistic benefits of the program, stating, "I was learning many things in Spanish that I didn't know...comparing Latin American culture with your original traditions...you're going to be immersed; you're going to be pushed to learn". This illustrates the enriching experience of learning both the language and the cultural context in which it is used.

These narratives reflect the profound impact of cultural immersion in educational programs, where participants not only learn the language but also deeply engage with diverse cultural perspectives. Their experiences underscore the importance of such programs in expanding global awareness and enhancing both linguistic and personal growth.

For example, these participants articulate the significance of experiencing diverse cultures and languages, highlighting the distinction between learning from native speakers and non-native speakers. This theme of cultural understanding and language practice is echoed in John, who mentions learning about both Spanish and Latin American cultures, reinforcing the dual impact of language and cultural exploration.

Connie reflected on her evolving view of teaching, emphasizing the significance of professional growth through the internship:

My overall opinion of the internship program is that it was really meaningful to my professional development. I used to believe that I wanted to teach in public schools here in El Salvador. For me, a teacher who explained the class, gave tests, and conducted activities like those was a real teacher, the best teacher. But when I realized that there are different ways to teach, and that it does not always have to be the teacher who is the center of the class...

Connie's quote reveals a transformative experience in her understanding of pedagogy, marking a shift from traditional to more student-centered teaching methods, which contributed significantly to her professional development.

Sheldon shared his recommendation for the internship program, emphasizing its positive impact on both his career and the opportunity to engage with a new culture:

Yes, I definitely recommend applying to these programs. Now, as a teacher at the university, I talk to my group of students about my experience, and they are motivated by it. Last year, one of my students at the university applied to this program, and I think they are currently in the United States. I'm not sure, but I believe it's a girl and a boy. For me, applying to these kinds of programs is a great experience because you have the opportunity to learn about a new culture

Sheldon highlights the value of cross-cultural exchange and its potential to inspire students, emphasizing the program's influence on both personal and professional levels.

Jeff also recommended the program, while offering a nuanced perspective on the potential variability in experiences based on the school's environment:

I will definitely recommend it. However, I recognize that when someone else goes to a different school, the rules might be different, and they might not have the opportunity to practice both languages. I would just advise being aware that this can happen or that this could be another possibility as well.

Jeff acknowledges the variability in program experiences, suggesting that while the program is valuable, future participants should be prepared for differences in language usage and school culture.

These participants highlighted important reasons why to recommend the program. For instance, Connie shares insights into how the program not only bolstered her teaching skills but also fostered confidence and independence, signaling a shift in her identity as an educator. The move away from traditional teaching paradigms, as discussed by Connie, aligns with Sheldon's emphasis on the program's motivational aspect, inspiring students to seek similar opportunities. Meanwhile, Jeff reflects on logistical comforts and the chance to practice multiple languages, illustrating the practical benefits of the experience.

Mandy reported:

I think that even the bad things are worth it. Having racism around may not be nice and doesn't feel good, but it helps us to grow. So, I think there is nothing that I could say that would suggest otherwise. I would say no matter what, go.

Lastly, this participant acknowledges the presence of challenges, such as racism, while framing these experiences as opportunities for growth.

Collectively, these narratives highlight the profound, multifaceted impact of the internship program on participants' professional and personal lives, promoting a holistic resilient understanding of education as an evolving process influenced by cultural dynamics.

Finally, the participants provided recommendations based on their lived experiences, emphasizing cultural immersion, pedagogical growth, and challenges. [Table 4](#) summarizes the category "Interns' Recommendations on AMITY," including the relevant codes, descriptions, and supporting statements.

Table 4. Interns' Recommendations on AMITY

Code	Description	Supporting statements
Cultural immersion and awareness	Exposure to diverse ways of living and thinking.	Mary: "It was the first time living for a year in another country...to know that there are people with another way of living, another way of thinking, another way to do things." George: "It helps you understand other cultures better and practice the language...speaking with a native speaker is not the same as practicing with people who learn to speak in another country." John: "I was learning many things in Spanish that I didn't know...comparing Latin American culture with your original traditions...you're going to be immersed; you're going to be pushed to learn." Connie: "My overall opinion of the internship program is that it was really meaningful to my professional development. [...] But when I realized that there are different ways to teach, and that it does not always have to be the teacher who is the center of the class..."
Professional and pedagogical growth	Shift to student-centered teaching and skill enhancement.	Sheldon: "Yes, I definitely recommend applying to these programs. Now, as a teacher at the university, I talk to my group of students about my experience, and they are motivated by it."
Motivational impact on others	Inspiring students to apply based on shared experiences.	

Code	Description	Supporting statements
Awareness of variability and challenges	Preparing for differences in schools and potential issues like racism.	<p>Jeff: "I will definitely recommend it. However, I recognize that when someone else goes to a different school, the rules might be different, and they might not have the opportunity to practice both languages."</p> <p>Mandy: "I think that even the bad things are worth it. Having racism around may not be nice and doesn't feel good, but it helps us to grow. So, I think there is nothing that I could say that would suggest otherwise. I would say no matter what, go."</p>

4. Discussion

The development of this research study highlights aspects related to the perception of lived experiences of Salvadoran English language teacher candidates who participated in different cohorts of the AMITY program in some immersion schools in the United States of America. As described throughout this paper, all students manifested a positive perception in their personal, academic, and professional growth. This research's results and main findings provide a wide-open overview of the benefits this program offers to university students who apply to have this experience abroad and to uplift the ELT profession in the Salvadoran context.

Our findings highlight a positive perception of interns regarding the AMITY program, aligning with the principles of experiential learning, where hands-on experiences significantly contribute to the development of practical skills (Kolb, 1984; Miettinen, 2021). Among their expectations, the interns reported developing teaching skills for working with kindergarten students, a level they are not typically prepared for in their university courses. This supports Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where they could expand their capabilities through practical exposure and guidance from experienced teachers (Yin, 2023; Beckett, Hager, 2002). The participants also emphasized the meaningful support from the university, schoolteachers, and the local community, which reflects the importance of a robust social support system in enhancing professional growth (Lave, Wenger, 1991; Beckett, Hager, 2002). This aligns with social constructivist theories, suggesting that learning is mediated by social interactions and collaboration (Vygotsky, 1978; Li, Wang, 2022). For example, interns frequently reflect on how interactions with mentors and other interns who shared similar sociocultural backgrounds helped them develop teaching strategies and adapt to new educational systems.

Another significant finding was that the interns were frequently engaged in code-switching, using both their native language (Spanish) and their target language (English). This mirrors research by Macaro (2005), who argues that code-switching can be a strategic tool in language learning, particularly in bilingual contexts. The interns reported that while they were allowed some flexibility to use Spanish in their classes, their primary focus remained on teaching and practicing English, contributing to their bilingual proficiency and cultural immersion. Recent studies further reinforce the role of bilingual practices in strengthening intercultural competence (Yin, 2023).

Moreover, the interns described the experience as enriching for their professional journey, particularly regarding their progress in teaching methodologies and adaptability in diverse educational contexts. This resonates with the concept of reflective practice (Schön, 1983; Fook, 2023), where individuals critically evaluate their experiences to inform future professional actions. In addition, they noted how their routines ranged from simple tasks like printing or copying documents to more complex activities such as preparing lessons and supporting schoolteachers. These varied responsibilities are reflective of apprenticeship models (Lave, Wenger, 1991; Beckett, Hager, 2002), where novices gradually take on more challenging tasks under the mentorship of experienced practitioners.

Eventually, the interns emphasized that their primary role involved teaching and practicing their native language, alongside immersing themselves in the host culture. Such immersion experiences are known to foster intercultural competence and adaptability, which are crucial for future educators working in globalized environments (Bennett, 1993; Li, Wang, 2022). The overall

experiences illustrate the benefits of the AMITY program in providing a platform for interns to explore different educational settings, enriching their personal and professional growth.

Finally, the results from this paper provide a wide overview of the teacher candidates' perception of the AMITY program, and how this project marks and shapes interns' lives from their careers until they are immersed in systematic institutional teaching procedures. Therefore, they acquire all the required skills to take the teaching beyond the demanding level in their natural and social setting. In addition, considering the interviewees' descriptions, these outcomes are compared with the results presented in the research study developed by Antropova et al. (2019). In their qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis, they emphasize that the interns' responses were extremely positive in aspects concerning the intern's personal and professional growth. They, moreover, continue explaining that it is clear that living and job training abroad significantly impacted participants' lives and greatly influenced their outlook on life in general. In exchange programs with a bilingual and dual immersion context, by engaging in purposeful, culturally mediated activities, AMITY interns acquired new teaching skills and developed professional identities that are enriched by their interactions within these dynamic contexts.

From a hermeneutic perspective, immersion into systematic institutional teaching procedures can be interpreted as a rite of passage where the interns transition from theoretical knowledge gained in their university courses to practical, hands-on experience in real-world educational settings. Gadamer's (2004) concept of the "fusion of horizons" is particularly relevant here, as the teacher candidates' prior understandings are reshaped and expanded through their participation in the program, allowing them to integrate their existing knowledge with new experiences gained in diverse classrooms. This interpretative transformation reflects how the interns' perceptions are not static but are continually shaped by the socio-cultural contexts they engage with, ultimately preparing them to navigate and thrive in demanding teaching environments (Lambeth, Smith, 2016).

Moreover, the program's impact extends beyond acquiring technical skills; it profoundly influences how interns perceive their roles within their natural and social settings. Through hermeneutic analysis, the AMITY program can be seen as a structured yet dynamic space where teacher candidates learn the mechanics of teaching and internalize a deeper sense of purpose and responsibility towards their students and communities. The notion of "hermeneutic self-understanding" (Ricoeur, 1992) suggests that as these interns immerse themselves in varied educational contexts, they undergo self-reflection and reinterpret their professional identities. This experience allows them to align their values with their teaching practices, thus taking their pedagogical approach to a level that transcends mere technical proficiency. By engaging with both the natural (e.g., classroom dynamics) and social (e.g., community support) elements of their teaching environments, these candidates cultivate a holistic teaching philosophy that is responsive to the needs of their students and the broader educational landscape (Beckett, Hager, 2002; Fook, 2023).

Therefore, the theoretical gap concerning the problem has been presented and solved; nevertheless, for future studies, researchers should focus on determining the interns' lived experience based on teaching methods and approaches abroad.

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6. Conflict of interest

We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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